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Essential elements in the philosophy of Adventist education.

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Adventist Education, Philosophy of

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The philosophy of Seventh-day Adventist education is distinctive. It is God-centered and Bible-based, service-oriented and Kingdom-directed. It is radically different from secular approaches that strike God from the equation, whether through a traditional or contemporary philosophy of education. Adventists are careful to adhere to Paul's warning, "Beware lest anyone spoil you through philosophy or vain deceit, after the *tradition of men*, after the *rudiments of the world*, and not after *Christ*" (Colossians 2:8, NIV, italics supplied).¹

Philosophy is "a set of ideas about how to do something or how to live."² It is derived from the Greek ?????????? (*philosophia*), which in literal terms means "love of wisdom."³ The problem is not in having a set of guiding

principles about how to conduct education, nor is it in seeking after wisdom. After all, Scripture instructs that “wisdom is the principal thing; therefore, get wisdom” (Proverbs 4:7, NKJV). As Paul points out, the problem is from *where* people obtain the ideas. It is where people head in their search for wisdom.

It is vital for Seventh-day Adventist believers and especially Adventist educators to clearly understand and implement the God-given philosophy of Adventist education. Ellen White, for example, wrote: “Teachers need to become acquainted with true philosophy, and where can this be found more perfect and complete than in the Word of God. This Word opens a sure path, in which our feet can travel with safety.”⁴

An Adventist philosophy of education is based, then, on the bedrock of Scripture. For the Seventh-day Adventists it is also guided by the writings of Ellen G. White, particularly in works such as the book *Education*.⁵ And it is expressed succinctly in *General Conference Working Policy*,⁶ section FE 05 10.

The Seventh-day Adventist philosophy of education is Christ-centered. Adventists believe that, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, God’s character and purposes can be understood as revealed in the Bible, in Jesus Christ, and in nature. The distinctive characteristics of Adventist education—derived from the Bible and the writings of Ellen G. White—point to the redemptive aim of true education: to restore human beings into the image of their Maker.

Seventh-day Adventists believe that God is infinitely loving, wise, and powerful. He relates to human beings on a personal level, presenting His character as the ultimate norm for human conduct and His grace as the means of restoration.

Adventists recognize that human motives, thinking, and behavior have fallen short of God’s ideal. Education, in its broadest sense, is a means of restoring human beings to their original relationship with God. Working together, homes, schools, and churches cooperate with divine agencies in preparing learners for responsible citizenship in this world and in the world-to-come.

Adventist education imparts more than academic knowledge. It fosters a balanced development of the whole person—spiritually, intellectually, physically, and socially. Its time dimensions span eternity. It seeks to develop a life of faith in God and respect for the dignity of all human beings; to build character akin to that of the Creator, to nurture thinkers rather than mere reflectors of others’ thoughts; to promote loving service rather than selfish ambition; to ensure maximum development of each individual’s potential; and to embrace all that is true, good, and beautiful.

Based on these sources, the following seven key components are identified as distinguishing features of an Adventist philosophy of education.⁷ These essential elements help to identify the purpose, product, paradigm, perspective, process, power, and priority of Adventist education. The More Photos section on this page has graphics illustrating these seven elements.

1. The Image of God

At creation, human beings were formed in God's image, after His likeness (Genesis 1:26, 27). Being created in God's image, *imago dei*, provides human beings with the capacity to love (John 3:16, 17; 1 John 4:16), the ability to relate and communicate (Genesis 1:3, 26-29; 2:18, 23; 3:8), the aptitude to administrate (Genesis 1:28; 2:15), and the facilities for creativity, decision-making, and rational thought (Genesis 2:16, 17; Joshua 24:15; Isaiah 1:18).

The foremost feature of the "image of God," however, is found in the spiritual and moral nature (Genesis 9:6; John 4:24). Human beings can communicate, develop relationships, exert leadership, and evidence creativity, but unless these are guided by moral values derived from principles embodied in God's character, the result will not be God-like.

Consider, for example, dominion—the ability to govern (Genesis 1:26-28). Whether self-serving or focused on selfless service, the *manner* of one's rule is ultimately of greater consequence than the mere *fact* of such rule. God-given abilities are not ends in themselves. Instead, they provide the capacity to make ethical decisions and live moral lives. Consequently, it is in the moral realm, in character, where the image of God is most clearly revealed (Leviticus 19:2; 20:26; Isaiah 43:15; Ephesians 4:24; 1 Peter 1:16).

Scripture states that believers have been *rescued* "from the dominion of darkness" (Colossians 1:13) and that the Lord *restores* their souls (Psalm 23:3). Why are redemption and restoration necessary? Included in the *imago dei* is volition, the ability to make decisions. This freedom of choice includes the ability to love or not to love, to trust or distrust. It includes the ability to choose good or evil, godliness or ungodliness.⁸

Tragically, the first human beings distrusted the Creator and chose to reject a relationship with God. As a result, humankind "fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23; 5:12). Throughout human history, human beings began to progressively lose the likeness to their Creator and the image of God has become increasingly distorted and deformed.

Scripture claims that restoration is God's gift (Psalm 51:23; Malachi 4:2). How does it happen? Paul points out that by looking to Jesus, by contemplating His life and teachings, believers are changed into His likeness (2 Corinthians 3:18). This restoration brings about a re-formation of life, a metamorphosis (Romans 12:2), in which old things are passed away and "all things are become new" (2 Corinthians 5:17, KJV).

Ellen White affirmed that "the true object of education is to restore the image of God in the soul."⁹ Consequently, the "image of God" component of the philosophy of education highlights the *purpose* of Adventist education and leads to the following implications:

Students are God's creation and thereby possess inherent value.

Educators are to express in their lives the attributes of God.

Adventist education is to lift up Jesus, so that students may see who God truly is and be transformed into His likeness.

2. Whole-Person Development

Luke 2:52 states that “Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man.” This multi-faceted growth incorporated four crucial dimensions: intellectual, physical, spiritual, and social development.

Similarly, Ellen White, in the opening paragraphs of the book *Education*, wrote that “true education is the harmonious development of the physical, mental, and spiritual powers.”¹⁰ She added that such a learning experience “prepares the student for the joy of service in this world and for the higher joy of wider service in the world to come,” highlighting the socio-emotional component.

Whole-person development describes the *product* of Adventist education. In the mental arena, the educational experience is to impart wisdom, a correct application of knowledge that seeks to glorify God and bless those around us. It contributes to higher-level thinking: analysis, evaluation, and creative thought and action. Fundamentally, it seeks to frame a biblical worldview, where each aspect of life and learning is viewed through a biblical lens, with students endeavoring to understand the discipline and its applications as God sees them. The physical component incorporates a healthy lifestyle, a solid work ethic, and recreation as re-creation—a change in routine that contributes to restoring God’s image. The spiritual focus encompasses Bible study, the development of a personal and corporate relationship with God, and the formation of moral character. The social dimension features service, witness, and orienting life and vocation as a response to the divine calling. In all, a “harmonious development”¹¹ that prepares the student for life here and “in the world to come.”

This key concept has several implications:

Students are to experience whole-person development at each educational level.

Educators are to incorporate key spiritual, physical, and social goals throughout the program of studies in a balanced approach that further develops cognitive competencies.

Missional experiences and service learning are to be hallmarks of Adventist education.

3. All Truth Is God’s Truth

God is the Source of truth (Proverbs 2:6; John 1:17; James 1:17), revealing facts and principles through Scripture, His created works in the physical world and human society, and creative and reflective thought processes. Each

of these, however, must point toward and function in harmony with its Source. And among these, Scripture is the clearest and most comprehensive revelation of God's truth.

The role of the Word in the teaching and learning process is highlighted throughout the Bible. David declared, "The teaching of your word gives light" (Psalm 119:130, NLT). And Christ prayed, "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth" (John 17:17).

What, then, is the place of the Bible in Adventist education? It is not to be a slice of the curriculum, one subject among many, competing for the student's time and attention. Instead, the Word of God is to be foundational, core to every subject area.

Ellen White underscored the role of Scripture as the great unifying factor in the program of studies: "The Bible should be made the foundation of study and of teaching."¹² Martin Luther, the Protestant Reformer, stated it this way:

I am much afraid that the universities will prove to be the great gates of hell, unless they diligently labor in explaining the Holy Scriptures, and engraving them in the hearts of youth. I advise no one to place his child where the Scriptures do not reign paramount. Every institution in which men are not unceasingly occupied with the word of God must become corrupt.¹³

Recognizing God as the Source of all truth is a sustaining *paradigm* in Adventist education and leads us to the following implications:

Students should interact personally with God's Word in each subject area.

Educators are to intentionally connect all knowledge to its Source.

Adventist education is to make the Scriptures the foundation of all academic endeavor.

4. A Comprehensive Spiritual Framework

The false spiritual-secular divide poses a challenge to a comprehensive biblical approach to education. This divide can be observed in viewing some aspects of life as spiritual—such as attending religious services and conducting personal devotions—while considering the rest secular, without reference to God or His plan for our lives. The same dualism can enter education, where the religion course, a Week of Prayer, or a devotional thought is viewed as spiritual, after which students and teachers get on with the rest of learning from a secular frame.

Scripture, however, holds that a spiritual perspective is to permeate all. "Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31, NKJV). "Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus" (Colossians 3:17).

Paul further affirmed that believers must “take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5). A program of studies is made up of courses, comprised of topics that consist of concepts. If all thoughts acknowledge the Lordship of Christ, this means that all concepts, topics, courses, and, in fact, the entire educational program must recognize that Jesus is Lord.

A comprehensive Spirit-filled *perspective*, then, encircles Christian life and learning. Paul wrote, “Put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator” where “Christ is all, and is in all” (Colossians 3:10, 11). In these biblical texts, the restoration of the image of God involves a renewal of the mind, of one’s view of life and learning. “Let this mind”—this attitude, this outlook—“be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:5, KJV).

In this vein, Ellen White writes, “Bible religion is not to be like a dash of color brushed here and there upon the canvas, but its influence is to pervade the whole life, as though the canvas were dipped into the color until every thread of the fabric was dyed a deep, fast, unfading hue.”⁴

The implications of the all-encompassing spiritual perspective include the following:

As Christians, we must think Christianly – endeavoring to view all things from God’s perspective.

The biblical worldview brings a unified approach to life and learning, precluding a spiritual/secular dichotomy.

Educators must ensure that a spiritual focus frames each academic subject and topic.

5. Nurturing Faith

In Scripture, faith, learning, and life are linked. Faith is first connected to learning about God and His plan for His children’s lives (Romans 10:17). This is essential but insufficient. Faith must also link to life. As James asserted, “faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead” (James 2:17). This faith-integrative process in learning and life is itself anchored in the Word of God, as shown in the following points.

Faith. Jesus asked, “When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?” (Luke 18:8). Faith is trust in something or someone. There are three key dimensions: (1) faith in God, both knowing about God and knowing Him experientially; (2) faith in the divine revelation—trust in God’s message and confidence in the divine plan; and, perhaps the most difficult at times, (3) faith in persons, in the potential of others and of ourselves, by God’s grace.

Learning. Jesus declared, “Come to me . . . and learn from me” (Matthew 11:28, 29). There are two essential aspects in this process: learning to think Christianly—a change of mind, and learning to live by faith—a change of life. The change of mind involves internalizing the attitudes and priorities of Christ. The change of life involves trusting the divine plan and reflecting that commitment in everyday choices and actions.

Life. Jesus announced, “I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly” (John 10:10, NKJV). This “abundant life” encompasses both a meaningful life and an eternal life. It provides focus and direction in our lives. The eternal dimension begins as individuals accept Christ as Savior (John 17:3).

What then is the unity of faith, learning, and life? It is when biblical beliefs and values provide the foundation for the academic endeavor, which, in turn, seeks to relate Christianity to the full range of the human experience. It is more than just a mixture or a chance encounter. It is when faith is the great integrating factor of all learning and life.

Nurturing faith is then the integrative *process* in the philosophy of Adventist education. Ellen White wrote, “The students in our schools and all our youth should be given an education that will strengthen them in the faith.”⁴⁵ This faith-affirming focus leads to the following implications:

Students must personally experience faith, developed through a relationship with God.

Teachers are to nurture and affirm faith, seeking a transformation in both mind and life.

An overarching goal of Adventist education is to form persons who trust God’s plan for their lives.

6. Spirit-Filled Teachers

The Holy Spirit is the *power* of Adventist education (Acts 1:8). “The Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will *teach you all things*” (John 14:26, NKJV, italics supplied). Spirit-filled teaching is a divine gift, granted to “prepare God’s people for works of service” and to edify the body of Christ “in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God” (Ephesians 4:11-13).

In Adventist education, teachers must be competent—demonstrating solid content knowledge and effective teaching skills, serving as caring mentors, and committed to professional growth. While competence is vital, it is nonetheless insufficient to accomplish the task of Christian education. Just as the Earth is surrounded by a life-giving atmosphere, so competence must be enveloped in commitment.

The concept of commitment is biblical. Paul wrote to Timothy, “The things that you have heard from me, commit these to *faithful* witnesses who will be able to teach others also” (2 Timothy 2:2, NKJV, italics supplied). Jesus further clarified that “a faithful and wise servant” is one to whom the master can give the responsibility of managing his household (Matthew 24:45).

Ellen White affirmed that “It is not enough that the teacher possess natural ability and intellectual culture. These are indispensable, but without a spiritual fitness for the work he is not prepared to engage in it. He should see in every pupil the handiwork of God—a candidate for immortal honors.”⁴⁶

Such commitment involves wholehearted consecration to God and to fulfilling the mission that He has entrusted. It includes dedication to the salvation of our students, faithfulness to the biblical worldview, and devotion to a life of witness and service. It means that Adventist educators should seek to represent their Master (2 Corinthians 5:20; 1 Peter 4:11).

In sum, Adventist educators are to be Spirit-filled—both competent and committed. This unified responsibility is to be a personal priority. Further, the integrated elements of competence and commitment are to guide the institution in the process of hiring, in nurturing the continued growth of its staff, and throughout the personnel assessment process. Some implications:

The Holy Spirit is essential to the success of the teaching-learning experience.

Educators are to view their profession as a divine calling, focused on the salvation of their students.

Each one involved in Christian education – whether parent, teacher, or leader – is to be faithful, as God’s representative.

7. Educating for Eternity

Sometimes educators adopt a restricted vision of what students can become and focus largely on helping them pass the subject or on seeking to ensure that they can graduate. At times, that vision is expanded by endeavoring to prepare students to be successful in the wider context of life—in their professions, their relationships with friends and family, and as responsible citizens. Adventist education, however, envisions a broader scope: Educating for eternity.

The concept of education with a view of eternity is embedded in Scripture (John 6:47) and the writings of Ellen White. “The true science of education,” Ellen White wrote, “will fit the youth for eternal life.”¹⁷ To this end, she encouraged: “Educate as for eternity.”¹⁸

Salvation is at the heart of the Adventist philosophy education. “The great Teacher calls for every youth to learn the true philosophy of education: What shall I do to be saved?”¹⁹ Consequently, the ultimate priority of Seventh-day Adventist education is that each student may personally experience God’s saving grace in their life. “The work of education and the work of redemption are one.”²⁰

Because a God-like character is the only asset “that we can take from this world to the next,”²¹ character formation is paramount in Adventist education. Ellen White asserted that “The great object to be secured [in the education and training of the youth] should be the proper development of character, that the individual may be fitted to rightly discharge the duties of the present life, and to enter at last upon the future, immortal life.”²²

Biblical values lay the foundation for the formation of moral character (Micah 6:8). Character, in turn, orients moral reasoning. God's instruction to the Levites can be applied to the work of Christian parents and teachers today: "They are to teach my people the difference between the holy and the common and show them how to distinguish between the unclean and the clean" (Ezekiel 44:23).

Integrity, compassion, and humility, joined by witness and selfless service are tangible expressions of Christian character, both now and throughout eternity.

The *priority* of educating for eternity provides us with implications for Adventist education:

Each student is to understand the true philosophy of education, including its eternal dimension.

Educators are to see their students as God sees them, candidates for heaven.

Adventist education must prioritize character formation, building a life commitment to the principles of God's kingdom.

Conclusion

The philosophy of education described in Scripture and delineated in the writings of Ellen White provides distinctive traits of Seventh-day Adventist education. This educational philosophy enables us to clearly define the purpose, product, paradigm, perspective, process, power, and priority of Adventist education. These elements, in turn, are essential in carrying forward The Great Commission (Matthew 28:19, 20) through the ministry of education.

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NOTES

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture texts in this article are quoted from the *New International Version* (NIV) of the Bible. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by International Bible Society. Other versions cited include: *King James Version* (KJV) of the Bible. *New King James Version* (NKJV). Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. All rights reserved. *New Living Translation* (NLT), copyright © 1996, 2004, 2007, 2013, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

2. *Merriam-Webster Learner's Dictionary*. <https://www.learnersdictionary.com/definition/philosophy>.

3. Biblehub, "Philosophia" (n.d.): <https://biblehub.com/greek/5385.htm>.
4. Ellen G. White, "The Bible in Our Schools," Manuscript 69, June 17, 1897 (hereafter abbreviated Ms). To state the matter conversely, she noted:
"Those who... are not willing to learn from the great Teacher the true philosophy of education... should never be entrusted with the work of teaching the youth" ("Education," Ms 141, October 24, 1898).
5. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1903).
6. *General Conference Working Policy* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2020).
7. An expanded discussion of the philosophy of Adventist education, written by George R. Knight as a three-part series under the title "Redemptive Education," may be found in a special issue of *The Journal of Adventist Education* (vol. 73, No. 1), available through these links: <https://circle.adventist.org/files/jae/en/jae201073010418.pdf>; <https://circle.adventist.org/files/jae/en/jae201073012217.pdf>; <https://circle.adventist.org/files/jae/en/jae201073013823.pdf>. Knight also explores the contours of Adventist educational philosophy in his book *Educating for Eternity: A Seventh-day Adventist Philosophy of Education* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2016). Another clear articulation of the philosophy of Seventh-day Adventist education may be found in "Journey to Excellence 2.0," developed by the Education Department of the North American Division (<https://journeytoexcellence.com/why>).
8. The following passages, among others, highlight the human capacity of free will: Numbers 17:5; Deuteronomy 12:11; 30:19; Joshua 24:15; 1 Chronicles 21:10; Proverbs 1:29; 3:31; Isaiah 7:15-16; 56:4; 65:12.
9. Ellen G. White, *Mind, Character, and Personality* (Nashville, TN.: Southern Publishing Association. 1977), 1:359.
10. Whites, *Education*, 13.
11. The concept of harmonious development in the writings of Ellen White is further examined in an article by the author: "Ellen White and the Harmonious Development Concept," *The Journal of Adventist Education* 76:5 (Summer 2014): 16-19:
<https://circle.adventist.org/files/jae/en/jae201476051604.pdf>.
12. Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1905), 402.
13. Quoted in J. H. Merle d'Aubigné, *The History of the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2003), 190. Note: French edition published in 1835. English edition published in London in 1846.
14. Ellen G. White, Letter 2, March 4, 1895 (hereafter abbreviated Lt). Written "to those who work at Cooranbong" (Australia) who were endeavoring to establish an Adventist college, now Avondale University.
15. White, "A Plea for Loyalty," Ms 106, November 20, 1905.

16. White, *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1943), 229. She further stated, "Those who are engaged as teachers in our schools should reach a high standard of consecration," "No Other Gods Before Me," *ARH*, June 13, 1907, 8.
17. White, "What Is Higher Education?" Ms 1, January 19, 1909.
18. White, "Diary/The Use of Means and Family Responsibilities," Ms 204, October 20, 1903. Referring to the educational work at what would become Loma Linda University, she stated, "We want in every way, everything possible done to have the educating power there that shall be of a sanctified order. We want not trivial work done there. We are working for eternity" ("Sermon/Thoughts on Exodus 19," Ms 187, May 19, 1907).
19. White, *Special Testimonies on Education* (1897). No imprint. (Reprint, Payson, AZ: Leaves-of-Autumn Books, 1978), 240.
20. White, *Education*, 30.
21. White, *Messages to Young People* (Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing Association 1930), 100.
22. White, *Mind, Character, and Personality*, 1:361. Ellen White further emphasized the primacy of character formation in the following statement:
"True education does not ignore the value of scientific knowledge or literary acquirements, but above intellectual acquirements, it values character. The world does not so much need men and women of great intellect as of noble character.... Character building is the most important work ever entrusted to human beings; and never before was its diligent study so important as now. Never was any previous generation called to meet issues so momentous; never before were young men and young women confronted by perils so great as confront them today" (*Education*, 225).

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